



Extension “Cares” Initiative:

Overview and Program Theory*

Over the course of their developmental years, millions of American children and youth will spend more time in child care, school-age care, and teen programs than in formal education. The need for quality care arrangements and out-of-school programs for infants through teens has never been greater.¹ In addition to supporting the development of children and youth,²⁻⁷ the existence of quality child care, school-age care, and teen out-of-school programs also has positive effects on the family and on the larger societal issues of educational attainment, employment, the economy, and the environment.⁸⁻¹⁰

In 1999, the national *Extension “CARES”... for America’s Children and Youth Initiative (ECI)* was approved as a Cooperative Extension System special initiative by the Extension Committee on Organization and Policy. The ECI was designed to address the critical need for quality child care, school-age care, and teen out-of-school programs in local communities. The vision of the ECI is to create a nation in which all children and youth are in safe, healthy, caring and enriching environments when they are away from their parents. The particular contribution of the ECI to this vision is to increase the quality, affordability, accessibility, availability and sustainability of child care, school-age care, and teen out-of-school programs.

ECI Goals, Delivery System and Structure

ECI Goals and Objectives

Given the importance of out-of-school time for young people, their families, and society, the overall goal of the ECI is to increase the availability, accessibility, affordability, and sustainability of *quality* child care, school-age care and teen out-of-school settings. In support of this overall goal, the ECI has established four sub-goals to be achieved over the course of the initiative:

1. *Improve the ability of program staff and home-based providers to offer high quality care, education and developmental experiences for children and youth.*
2. *Improve the quality of child care, school-age care and teen out-of-school settings.*
3. *Improve the ability of families to better support their children in out-of-home settings.*
4. *Improve community and state supports for programs.*

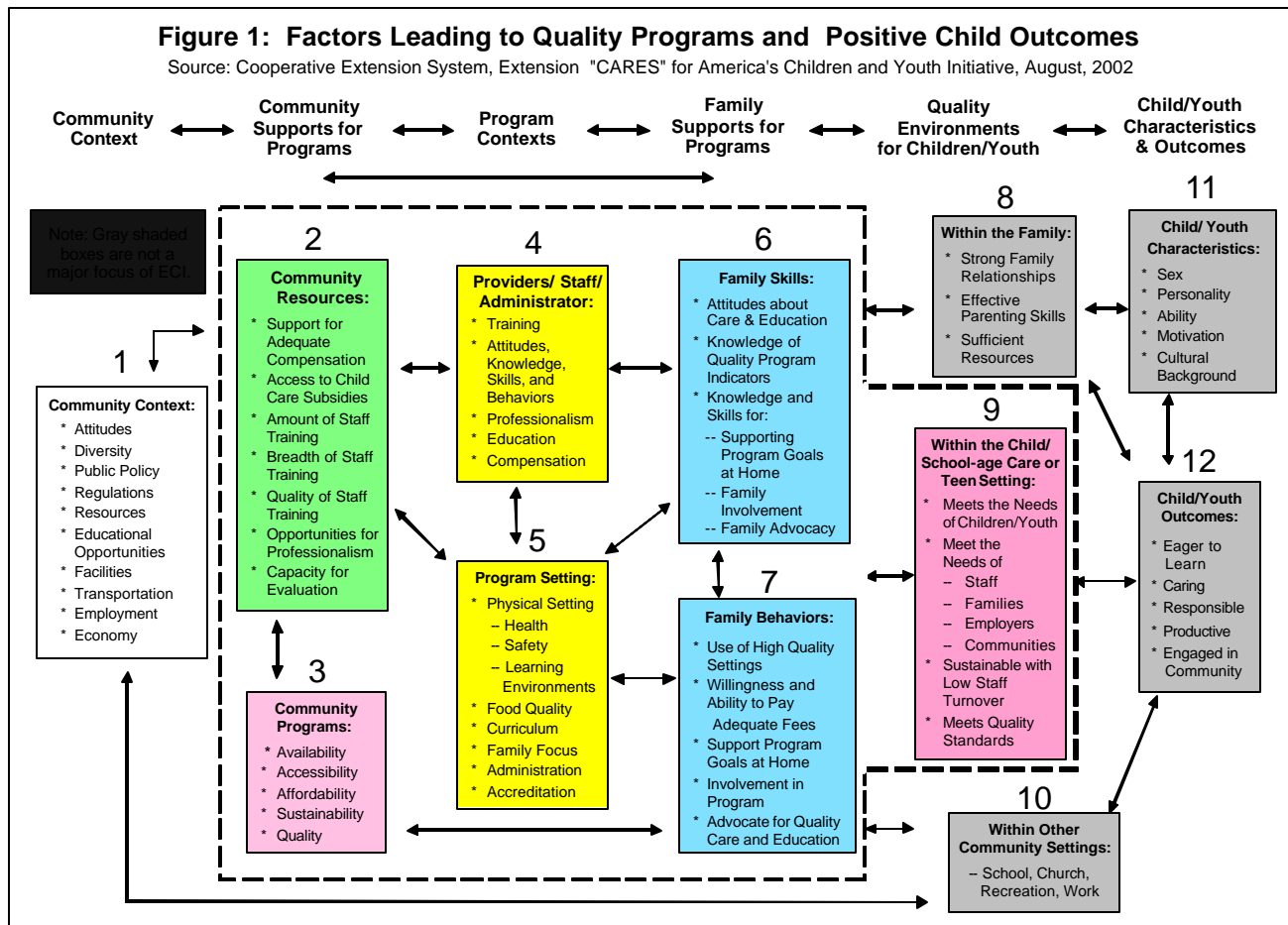
Twenty-one objectives have been established in support of the four ECI sub-goals. The complete list of goals, sub-goals and objectives is available at the ECI website:

<http://www.reeusda.gov/extensioncares/>

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Figure 1 outlines the theoretical model developed by the ECI Evaluation Team to identify factors and their interactions that promote positive youth outcomes. This theoretical model proposes that positive youth outcomes (Box 12) are the result of the interaction between characteristics of the individual child or youth (Box 11), and the quality of the environments presented by the family (Box 8), the care or youth program setting (Box 9), and the larger community (Box 10).

To be effective, the ECI must demonstrate an increase in settings that have the characteristics outlined in Box 9 as well as improved availability, accessibility, affordability, and sustainability of those settings (Box 3). These goals will be achieved through improving community (Box 2, ECI sub-goal 4) and family (Boxes 6-7, ECI sub-goal 3) supports for programs as well as the program context itself (Boxes 4 and 5, ECI sub-goals 1 and 2).



Unique Features of the ECI

The ECI goes beyond most other efforts to address out-of-home experiences for children and youth in four ways. First, the ECI focuses on positive youth development from birth to late adolescence, integrating the typically separated fields of early childhood care and education, school-age care and out-of-school time for youth and teens. Second, the ECI simultaneously considers the interaction between educational, social, health, economic, and environmental systems from the level of the individual to that of society in order to develop complex, interdisciplinary solutions to local issues. While there is growing emphasis on connecting two or three of these systems to address early childhood and youth development issues, few efforts have been made to integrate all four. Third, the ECI draws simultaneously on the research knowledge of the land-grant university system and the knowledge gained through professional practice¹¹ to guide program development and evaluation at the local level. Finally, as outlined in the next section, the ECI draws upon already established partnerships at the community, state, and national levels to effect change.

The ECI Delivery System: The USDA Cooperative Extension System

The ECI is implemented through the national Cooperative Extension System which is a partnership between the U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA), 105 land-grant universities in each state and U.S. territory, and 3,150 county Cooperative Extension offices tied to the land-grant universities and Tribal colleges. The Extension System brings the expertise, programs and resources from these three levels to urban and rural communities in order to improve the quality of life of local citizens, including children, youth, and families .

The ECI draws upon these already established partnerships at the community, state, and national levels to effect change and rapidly transfer knowledge throughout the nation through a mature, county-based knowledge transfer system aligned with the land-grant universities. Working from educational and empowerment perspectives, the goal of the Cooperative Extension System is not to solve people's problems, but to teach people to solve their problems.

ECI Program Management and Structure

At the national level, the ECI is coordinated by the ECI Management Team comprised of Extension county agents and state specialists, teaching-research faculty, administrators, USDA program leaders and non-extension collaborators. Four national sub-committees also have been formed to guide implementation and evaluation of the ECI: 1) child care, 2) school-age care, 3) out-of-school time for teens, and 4) evaluation. These sub-committees have representation on the management team. An ECI liaison from each state provides the link between county and state ECI activities and the national ECI efforts.

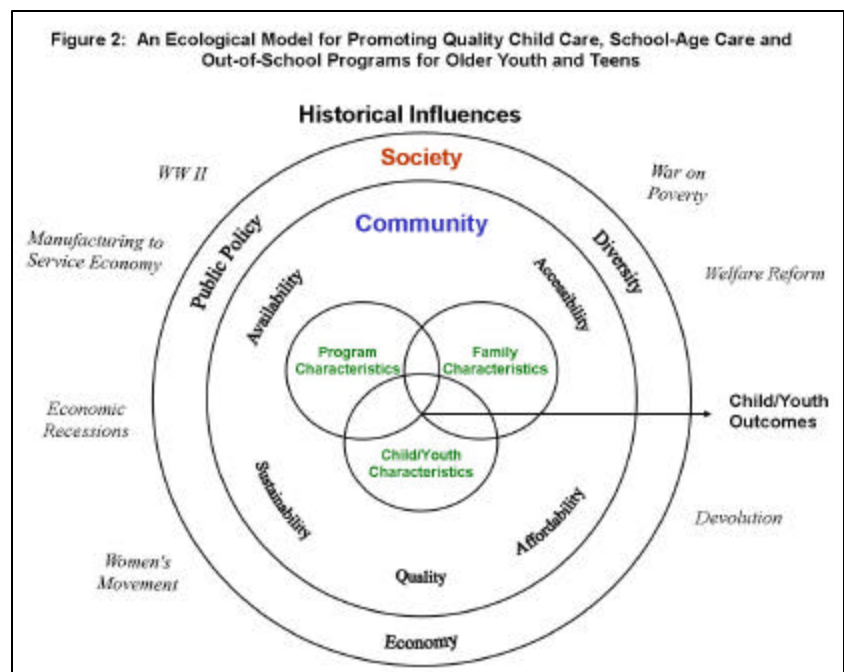
Theories and Approaches Underlying the ECI

Six perspectives have contributed to the program theory underlying the ECI. These include: 1) an ecological systems theory; 2) a developmental framework; 3) an interdisciplinary approach; 4) a sustainable communities model; 5) an action research, empowerment-based evaluation strategy, and 6) a respect for diversity. The contribution of each perspective to the development of the ECI is discussed below.

Ecological Systems Theory

Urie Bronfenbrenner¹²⁻¹⁴ has developed a complex theoretical framework to explain factors at many different levels that affect the growth and development of individuals. According to this theory, each child or youth has personal characteristics that influence their development. Moreover, children and youth influence and are affected by their family, peers, and other settings with which they interact on a regular basis, including child care, school-age care, and teen-out-of-school programs. The children/youth and each of the systems directly supporting them are, in turn, affected by the structures and conditions at the community level. Communities are influenced by the larger society and by major societal and world events over time.

Bronfenbrenner's ecological model is adapted to child care, school-age care and teen programs in Figure 2. This model proposes that child and youth outcomes are determined, in part, by the interaction between the child or youth, their family and the out-of-home program setting.



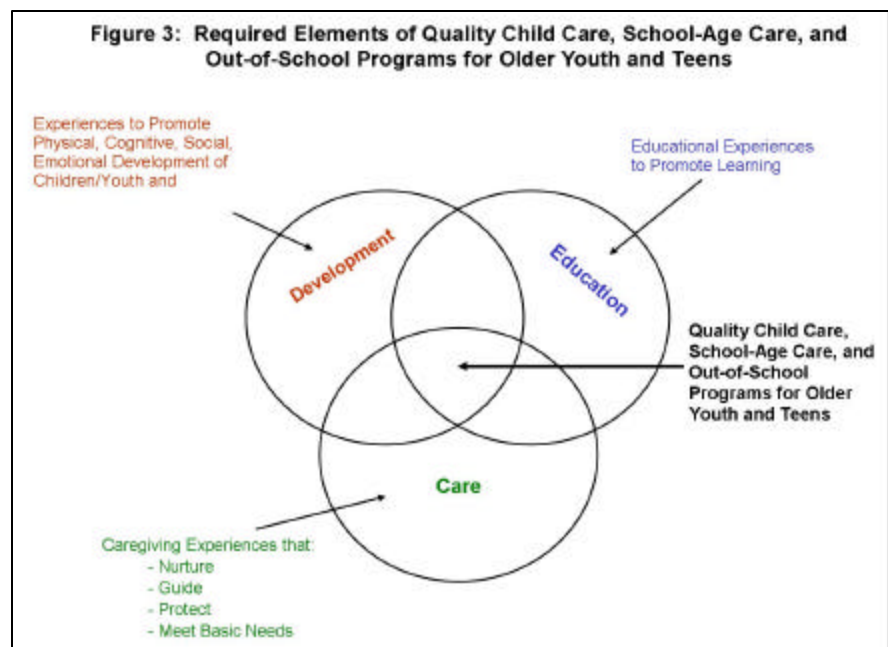
The particular reactions of children or youth, family members and the program itself also are influenced by community-level variables that determine the availability, accessibility, affordability, sustainability, and quality of the child care, school-age care, and teen programs available to families. Families and youth are less likely to have positive experiences in communities where there are few programs available, little choice in programs, or in which the programs are hard to get to, cost too much, don't meet the needs of the children, family, or employers, have high rates of staff turnover, quickly go out of business, or are of poor quality. At the societal level the national and global economies, public policy, and cultural values all influence family functioning. These societal issues also affect the ways in which local communities provide out-of-home settings for children and youth.¹⁵⁻¹⁷ Historical influences, such as World War II, the shift from a manufacturing society to the Information Age and the growth of the service sector, economic recessions and devolution all have influenced the ways in which families care for children as well as the community and societal supports available to children, youth and families.

Bronfenbrenner's model highlights the need to work simultaneously at many different levels within the model -- the individual, the family, the community, and society -- in order to effect lasting change. Consistent with this model, sub-goals one and two of the ECI are designed to improve the quality of child care, school-age care, and teen program settings. Sub-goal three focuses on strengthening the ability of families to select and become involved in high quality settings for their children and youth. Sub-goal four addresses community and societal supports for child care including improving the ability of policy-makers to make informed decisions, assisting employers to better support the needs of working parents, helping communities to provide educational experiences and training for providers and staff and ensuring the availability, accessibility, and affordability of quality child care, school-age care, and teen out-of-school programs.

An Interdisciplinary Approach

Today's families currently have many options for children and youth when parents are not with them. This diversity of program formats has arisen to meet the various needs of families, communities, and society at different points in history.¹⁸⁻²¹ Care by family always has been an important resource used by parents throughout history and this format continues today.

Rather than view one perspective or type of setting as better or worse than another, the ECI agrees with the framework developed by the National Institute on Out-of-School Time²² which specifies that *ALL* settings for children and youth must include a focus on **development, education AND caregiving** (see Figure 3). The ECI theoretical framework specifies that quality settings for children, youth and teens must acknowledge the importance of each perspective by incorporating the *basic* elements of each approach into practice.



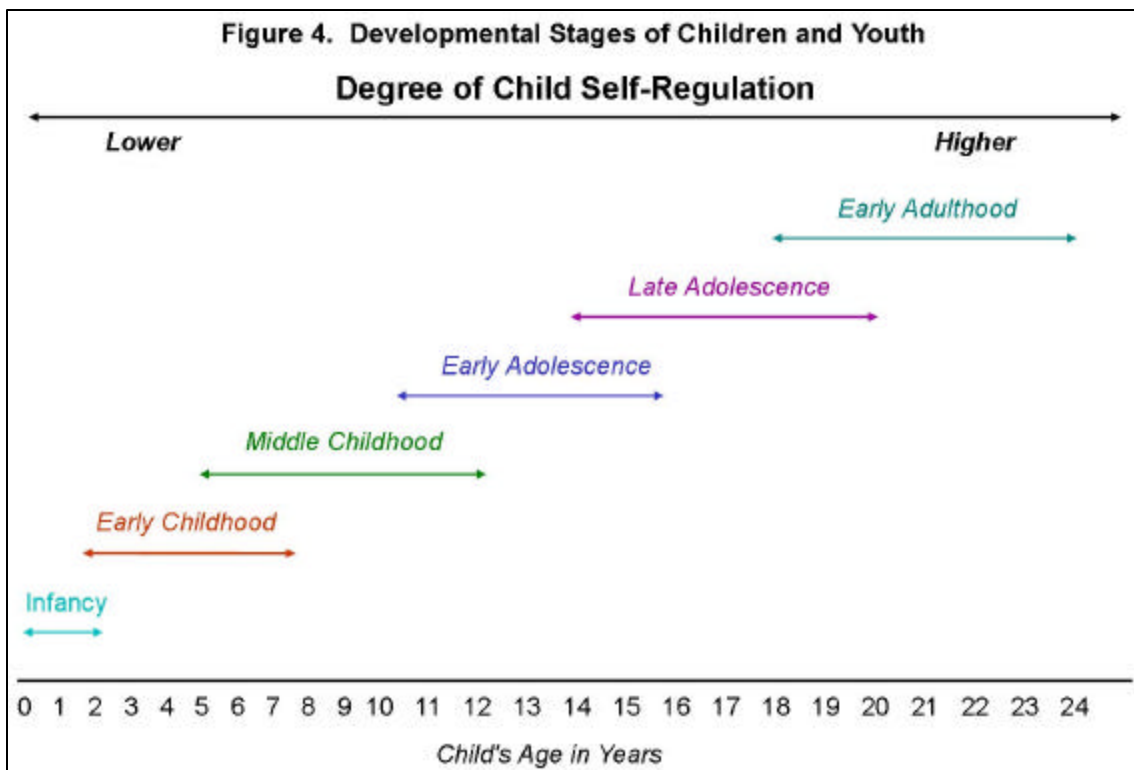
In our diverse society, however, programs must have flexibility in the *extent* to which they emphasize each of these components. Some programs may put somewhat greater stress on education, others on caregiving, and still others on providing a variety of experiences to promote development. This variation in emphasis allows families to choose the particular setting that is best for each child.

While parents and decision-makers typically understand the importance of educational and developmental experiences for children and youth, they often misunderstand the concept of caregiving. At best, “care” is equated with meeting basic health and safety standards. At worst, it is seen as the “warehousing” of children by poorly educated and trained providers. In contrast to these more limited definitions of caregiving, the ECI defines caregiving as those aspects typically provided by families that are critical to positive child and youth outcomes. As outlined in the National Extension Parent Education Model,²³ these critical components include meeting basic needs and protecting children and youth. But the full definition of “care” also requires providers and staff, like parents, to nurture, guide, motivate and advocate for children and youth.

A Development Framework

Three developmental frameworks underlie the ECI model: life-span human development, family development, and professional development. A life-span human development perspective focuses on the development of individuals. A family development perspective proposes that families, too, change over time based on both typical and unique experiences encountered by the family system. These experiences affect the ability of families to meet basic needs, become self-sufficient, promote strong family relationships, and nurture, protect, guide, motivate and advocate for their children and youth. Professional development frameworks have evolved to support the staff who work with children and youth. These frameworks highlight the need for both horizontal and vertical growth of individual staff members through education and training, mentoring and support, and ties to professional organizations.²⁴⁻²⁶ Child care, school-age care, and teen out-of-school programs must be designed to meet not only the developmental needs of children and youth but also the needs of their families and the program staff who work with them.

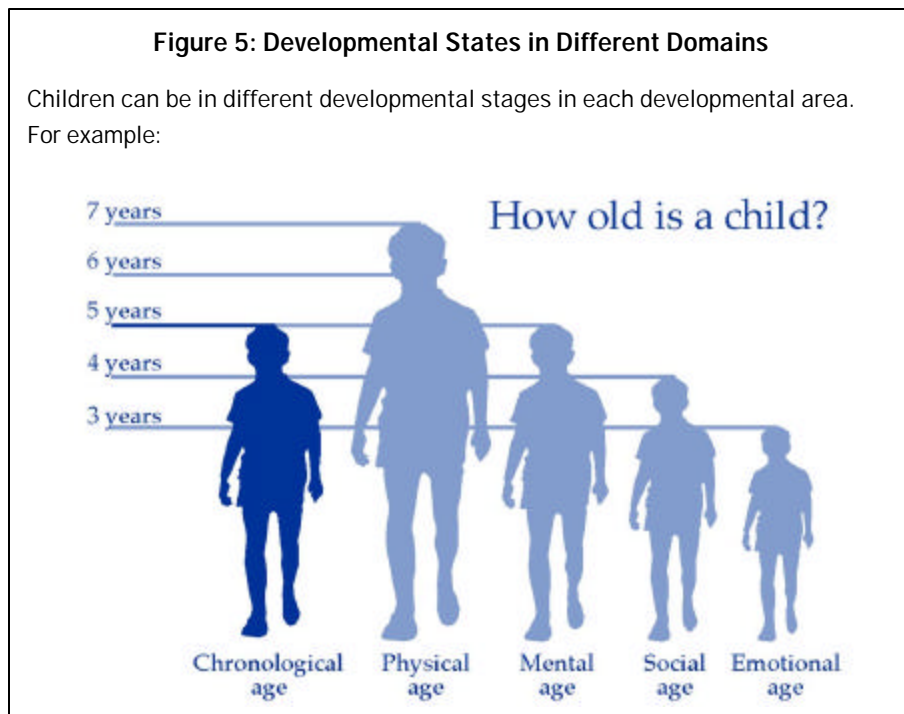
Two important developmental principles must be recognized in working with children and youth.²⁷ First, as can be seen in Figure 4, age is not a perfect predictor of developmental stage.



These developmental periods, which often overlap in a single setting, are arranged along a “self-regulation” continuum, with younger children more dependent on the adults around them for regulating their behavior.²⁸

Second, each child or youth develops at different rates within each of the four (physical, mental, social and emotional) developmental areas (see Figure 5). Children and youth do best in programs that are compatible with their development stages and foster growth in *each* area.

Some objectives under sub-goals one and three of the ECI are designed to help family members and child/youth professionals better understand the developmental stages of children/youth and to offer developmentally-appropriate experiences. Other objectives ensure that program characteristics, such as the safety and nutritional value of the food served and the curriculum offered provide a safe, healthy and enriching environment in which children can learn and develop. Some objectives promote professionalism among program staff. Still others encourage families to become involved in the program and to share information with staff about parental goals, family values, and the characteristics of their children and youth.



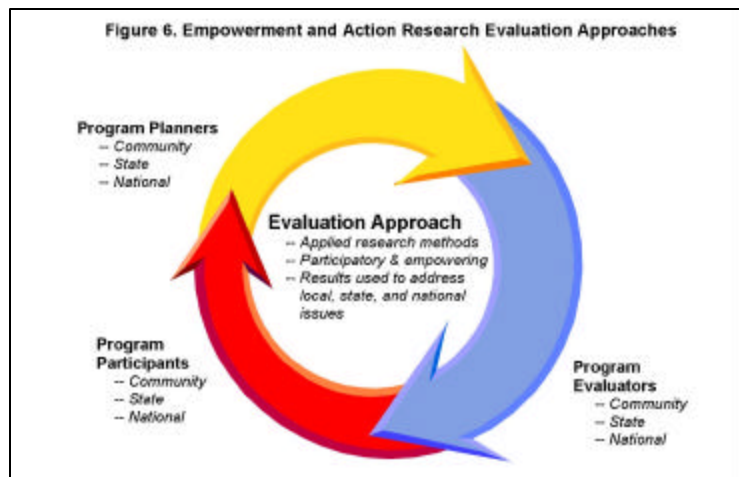
A Sustainable Communities Model

America's communities are faced with many challenges today. In response to these conditions, a sustainable communities movement has arisen across America and internationally which draws upon and integrates findings from diverse disciplines concerned with the economy, the environment, and human capital.²⁷ This approach requires communities to balance the needs of business and industry, the environment and the people who live there in order to create communities that are economically prosperous, environmentally sound, and socially equitable. Sustainable communities reinforce the efforts of families to instill in children a concern for others; the importance of entering the workforce in order to contribute to a sustainable economy; a respect for the environment; and the importance of community involvement and civic duty.²⁹⁻³⁰

As outlined in Box 9 in Figure 1, a sustainable community model requires that quality child care, school-age care, and teen programs meet the needs of families, employers, and communities in addition to meeting the needs of the children and youth. Similarly, the community has an obligation to meet the needs of programs through providing adequate and safe facilities, training programs for the child- and youth-serving workforce, and funds to ensure that ALL children and youth can access high quality care and educational settings staffed by professionals who earn wages commensurate with their education and experience (Boxes 1 and 2).

An Action Research, Empowerment-based Evaluation Strategy

All communities must use resources effectively. Action research and empowerment-based evaluation strategies were used both to develop the overall initiative and to determine outcomes (see Figure 6).



An action research approach involves local community members in developing appropriate research methods for collecting and analyzing the information that is needed to effect real-world change in their communities.³¹⁻³² An empowerment evaluation strategy requires that evaluations be conducted in such a way as to promote self-determination, help people and communities help themselves, and through this locally-controlled process, to improve the local situation.

A Respect for Cultural Heritage and Diversity

Cultural diversity allows rapid adaptation to changing conditions²³ and contributes to America's continuing prosperity. A respect for cultural diversity is embodied in all theoretical perspectives outlined in this paper. The ecological framework requires understanding of the diverse settings at many levels of society that affect the development of children and youth. Providing experiences that are developmentally appropriate for children, youth, adults, and families requires carefully adapting activities and experiences to meet the unique needs of each person and the family as a whole. An interdisciplinary approach goes beyond specifying one "right" definition of quality of care. Rather, this approach recognizes that all children and youth need to be in an environment that provides care, education, and developmentally appropriate experiences while at the same time acknowledging that some children and youth may benefit from settings that place different importance on each component. The sustainable communities model requires balance between three diverse and typically separate aspects of communities--the economy, the environment, and social functioning. The use of applied action-research and empowerment approaches to evaluation ensure that the questions asked, the measures and methods used to collect data, and the interpretation of the results are culturally relevant and appropriate.

Respect for diversity also is embodied in Figure 1 by the use of all bi-directional arrows to represent interactions among systems. The relevant variables and the direction of effects will differ by community and must be determined through locally conducted needs assessments and research. By incorporating respect for diversity in all components of the ECI, we are more likely to develop solutions that are equitable, culturally sensitive, and meet the needs of all of American's children.

Conclusion

America's strength lies in its people, its diversity, and its democratic principles. Local citizens are the workers, parents, and decision-makers of today. Children and youth are the workers, parents, and decision-makers of tomorrow. Communities provide the contexts in which children, youth, and families are protected, nurtured, and educated. The extent to which we protect our human capital is related to the future economic growth of our communities.³³ Our ability to successfully face future challenges depends on the ability of families, communities, and our nation to protect, nurture, guide, motivate, educate, and advocate for our children and youth. The vision of the ECI is that all children and youth are in safe, healthy, caring and enriching environments when they are away from their parents. "CARING"... for America's children and youth is everyone's business, and everyone benefits.

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